

Chapter 10

Rehearsing the **Weird Sisters**:
The Word as Fetish in *Macbeth*

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Among the supernatural entities that issue from the trap in Shakespeare's plays to meddle in human affairs, the witches in *Macbeth* precipitate an especially disorienting brand of linguistic crisis. *Macbeth* treats their sly, riddling reference to the future as a supernatural speech act, as though the words themselves, rather than his actions, had brought about his ascendancy. Confusing semantics and magic, he elides the capacity of words to predict the future with their power to intervene directly, like charms or fetishes, in the processes of fate. Supposing the witches' speech to proffer the future in the form of a reified image, *Macbeth* fails to understand the specific way that words encode magic, that is, how they depend on tricks to unlock their content (such as being pronounced backward or penned in blood); how, by rendering semantic interpretation inadequate, they mimic the complex, illusive movements of providence that, in Shakespearean drama, are full of ironies and reversals, especially for those who struggle to oppose them.

In April 1994, I conducted two "witch workshops," one at Amherst College, the other at the University of Rochester. The Amherst participants were undergraduate theater majors; the students who took part at Rochester were enrolled in a graduate English seminar on Renaissance magic. Through each practicum, I proposed a general style of reading *Macbeth*, using physical games and exercises to analyze cross-sections of speech and dramatic action. More specifically, however, I was hoping to dislodge Shakespeare's language from its ordinary linguistic context (its connection to individual speakers, and to ideas about authority and intention), to turn it into something more magical and tactile, thereby causing the distinction between sign and thing, word and flesh, representation and the flow of

instantly arose. For example: How does covetous desire, generally speaking, play on stereotypes, so that women are imagined as embodying envy in a gender-specific way? How does the embodiment change when the parts are distributed among a triumvirate of bearded witches, rather than played solo, in the form of fainthearted Macbeth, who envies the future that the *witches* have promised to Banquo's heirs? I hoped to work toward answers, but slowly, through the logic of the situation and the actresses' physical discoveries. As the example above illustrates, the idea of physical realization came alive as a technique when the actresses and I discovered how the words recited by the first witch to her *sister* could operate as the basis for an action-reaction exercise. The five-word dialogue, embedded in her tale, formed the kernel around which each actress took her turn playing a role in the miniature drama. The key to animating the text lay in the fact that the witches were *three* in number: the narrative, passing from one paired configuration to another, mutated freely, generating a spectrum of ripostes that ranged from playful aggression to genuine mockery. In the course of the rotation, the actresses began to experiment with more subtle gestures: gestures that burlesqued the sailor's wife, brought the witch and the sailor's wife into closer communion, or turned the appetitive greed of the original encounter into a more open, though not less complex, erotic business. In one round, for example, the actress playing the witch, imitating the sailor's wife, tried using the vernacular, "aroynt thee, bitch," to emphasize the secular connotations of the seventeenth-century terminology. This, in turn, led us to imagine a version of the duel performed by male actors, where the witch's "give me" might be spoken as mock solicitation, to which a gay sailor's "wife" would answer, simultaneously expanding his chest and affecting disdain: "Aroynt thee bitch; SNAP! SNAP! SNAP!"

First Witch. Where hast thou been, *sister*?
Second Witch. Killing swine. (1.3.1-2)

Now we started over, this time from the top of the scene. I asked the actresses to choose a position, requiring only that the members of the trio establish physical contact with each other. The women experimented with several different ways of sitting before finding one they liked. The first witch sat on the floor and spread her legs. The second witch, seated behind, wrapped her legs around her *sister's* waist. The two women rocked slightly, their position both relaxed and provocative. The fact that the first witch could not see her *sister* made the pose even more intimate (eye to eye con-

tact would have been too much of a test), while the legs of the second witch, planted in the open space between her sister's thighs, made possible—within the erotic dyad—a wider, more subtle range of aggressive interactions: distrust, goading, withholding, and seduction. The question ("where hast thou been, sister?") expressed a mixture of curiosity and suspicion (possibly a hint of sibling rivalry), but the first witch's physical position, turned toward the audience, sheltered her face from her sister. Her movements worked their way into a conglomeration more intricate than one-on-one dialogue, because her body, together with the other actress, comprised an organism of four feet, four hands—a form that both countenanced and contained the text's host of shifting voices. The second witch's answer, "Killing swine," provoked hunger, then envy, in the other's face. Meanwhile, this look migrated into the reaction of the third witch, who, suddenly appearing from her hiding place behind the second, accused the first witch, suspiciously, "Sister, where *thou?*"

At Rochester, the students' preparation included reading several transcripts of early modern witch trials, including the case of Ursula Kemp, a woman accused of witchcraft at St. Oyth's in 1582. In the evidence taken against her, Kemp's eight-year-old son, Thomas, testifies that his mother has four familiars: "Titty is like a little grey cat, Tiffin is like a white lamb, Puggin is black like a road, and Jack is black, like a cat. And he saith, he hath seen his mother at times to give them beer to drink, and of a white loaf or cake to eat; and saith that in the night- time the said spirits will come to his mother and suck blood of her upon her arms and other places of her body" (Rosen 1991, 110).

In the world of sixteenth-century witch trials, small things are dangerous. Thomas's testimony is the slander of a live-in tattler, a little boy who not only enjoys spying on his mother, but also hangs on to small details: minutia that are as plain (bits of white loaf) as they are perverse (sucking blood upon her arms). His testimony foregrounds the malignant possibility of other small things, such as the familiars themselves, demons imagined to run Ursula's spierfal errands. Titty, Tiffin, Puggin, and Jack form a fellowship of plagues, incarnated in the shape of domestic pets that live together in homely vessels: boxes, kettles, or urns. Thomas says that Ursula once loaned the familiars to his godmother Newman in an earthen pot, "the which she carried away with her under her apron" (Rosen 1991, 110). In Thomas's eyes, it is the small things, the petty things, which constitute the most fascinating, yet least accessible part of his mother's secret arts—both magical and domestic.

The testimony of Ursula's neighbors reveals women who, although sharing more fully in her secrets, and by extension, in a network of female relations, harbor suspicions of other women, not to mention hostilities toward certain women who they perceive as seeking to pry into the sanctum of their domestic lives. Witchcraft emerges at a provincial level, out of conversations in a doorway: where one woman seeks to rebut another's visit, turns down her offer of service, or refuses to trade with her. "The said Ursula fell out with Grace Thurlow, for that she [Grace] would not suffer [Ursula] to have the nursing of her child" (Rosen 1991, 107). On another occasion, Grace turns down Ursula's offer to dye a pair of hose in return for a handful of scouring sand. It is after incidents like these that a witness, in retrospect, will claim that she (or a family member) began to suffer from a mysterious ailment, a sign of the witch's reprisal. Grace Thurlow's snubs and Ursula Kemp's imagined retaliations testify, on both sides, to a long memory for little words, for passing slights. Had Grace not brought charges against Ursula, it seems perfectly possible that Ursula would have brought them against Grace—as surely as the opportunity for gossip missed on one side, seldom fails to speed its dissemination on the other.

In using Kemp's trial to historicize the rehearsal, it was the quality of smallness, if not quaintness and homeliness, that I wished to find and highlight in the witches' interactions. The particulars of Ursula's case (the particulars of a village kitchen or marketplace) echo already in Shakespeare's detail of the chestnuts, while the munching of the sailor's wife, both unmannerly and ostentatious, is resonant with the recurring interplay of village wives who covet and withhold things from each other. But I also wanted to preserve the lesson we had learned at Amherst, viz. to feel how the smallest—and most prized—of the *witch sisters'* possessions were morsels of contentious speech, such as those that the first witch had gained, and brought back to her *sisters*, from her momentous meeting with the sailor's wife. Those pieces of language, the stuff of daily greed and resentment, were—like the fetus of a secular spell—something out of which the three witches generated endless mimetic versions of a world from which, by dint of their special fellowship, they were exiled. That is to say, we found that the witches were, to a great extent, ciphers, capable in their reenactment of the "rumped runyon's" stinginess, of turning her resentful speech into a medium for imitation, transformation, and parody.

We sat in a circle and "passed" the witches' words from one person to the next, trying to hear how, even within Shakespeare's text, they afforded a choral effect, never belonging to just one speaker, but reverberating, at

first with two voices, but then with more, as each witch snatched her sister's phrase, tried it on like borrowed jewelry, and personalized the intonation:

Her husband's to Aleppo gone, Master o' th' Tigr. (1.3.7)

"Her husband" technically refers to the sailor whose wife was charged, in lines 4–6, with disparaging the first witch; the latter thus signals to her sisters that she is plotting revenge against the husband for his wife's abuses. But the line itself, as it moved around the circle, was transformed, by tonal shifts, into a wayward scrap of gossip: "Master o' th' Tigr," whispered the first woman to the person beside her, who upon hearing, sneered and turned to the woman on her other side, saying in a way that both mimicked and ridiculed the first speaker's snobbishness: "Master o' th' Tigr—ger." The third woman responded with a titter, and passed the meddling talk on (Greenblatt 1993, 121).³

The original production of *Macbeth*, performed in 1606 at James I's court, would have traded on the style of a courtly antimasque.⁴ The transcendent harmony of the monarch's microcosm (the court as a miniature version of the kingdom, the kingdom as a miniature version of the divinely ordered cosmos) was challenged, in the antimasque, by actors disguised as one of several subdivisions of the kingdom of darkness: wildmen, goblins, witches, and so on. James's emblematic victory over his assailants was regularly represented through a trick of stage machinery, which allowed the decor to open and reveal the grandeur of the court, its jewels, its light, and its costumes, bursting through and flooding over the darkness of the fictive setting.⁵ In Shakespeare's play, the witches are cast more ambivalently, making it difficult to tell whether they speed Macbeth's downfall indifferently or maliciously. In 4.1, having agreed to let Macbeth witness the future, the *weird sisters* conjure a spectral procession of eight kings, "the last king with a glass in his hand" [stage direction]. This mirror was probably carried into the audience and angled so that, in its frame, the spectators caught the reflection of the King himself.⁶ By predicting James I's succession through this eerie trick, the witches become an ambiguous cog in the mechanism of sanctioned historical representation, demonstrating their ability to transform the trappings of king and state, in the same way they transform everyday speech, into objects that are half-ghostly amulets, half-ingenuous stage devices.

By copying the speech patterns of village wives, their gossip and tell-tale accusations, Shakespeare's *weird sisters* evoke certain ideas about femi-

nine malice and frivolity, ideas that not only underlie, aim, and focus specific accusations of witchcraft (as seen in the St. Oyth trial), but contribute to the play's broader demonization of women's language. In the original production, the *weird sisters* would have been played by bearded adult actors, as opposed to the boy actors or apprentices conventionally cast in female roles; thus Baroque's, "You should be women! And yet your beards forbid me to interpret/ That you are so" (1.3.44-6). The witches are not only as Macbeth calls them, 'imperfect speakers,' but also imperfect simulations of women. By forcing their biological gender into an equivocal register, Shakespeare complicates the business of demonization: for a Jacobean audience, the witches work as comic feminine caricatures ("they are part of the fun of staging witchery" [Berger 1982, 68]), at the same time they challenge—even threaten to emasculate—the "tightly muscled rhetoric" (Berger 1982, 68-69) that Macbeth and the other Scottish warriors have buckled on to make up for their general lack of "manly readiness" (2.3.130). At the end of the play, when the *weird sisters'* macabre prophecies reveal themselves as theatrical tricks (Birnam wood marching in the form of camouflaged soldiers), their magical powers become as suspect, if not as clunky, as their hybrid gender.⁸

Again, my purpose in turning toward history was only in part to discover the originary meanings encoded in Shakespeare's witches: it was worth knowing and discussing, for example, the ways in which the *weird sisters* parody feminine trickery, at the same time they mock and deflate manly virtues. But I also wished to pull the text in different directions, using its intrinsic indeterminacy as a basis for theatrical experimentation. The witches' campy, composite qualities frustrated our attempts to organize ourselves into a unified witch "community": that is, to reduce the *weird sisters* to a coven of cackling stereotypes or join them together as agents of a feminist rereading—in which they might conspire, as women, to denaturalize the male-to-male links in political succession or undermine the coherence of Duncan's patriarchal rule. Situated at opposite ends of an interpretive spectrum, these available readings crystallized a facet of the text, while failing to make enough of the dissonance internal to the witches' verse itself. Mobile, contentious, and shared, the *weird sisters'* speech elicited fluid and unpredictable emotional responses. Therefore, we aimed at propagating multiple and layered versions of a single scene, as a basis for testing, rather than demarcating, its gender implications.

In both workshops, we placed ourselves at the fulcrum of the *weird sisters'* double gender, at the vortex of their triple speech. The participants found that moving the particles of storytelling, hearsay, and prattle around

of frog./ Wool of bat, and tongue of dog./ Adder's fork, and blind-worm's sting./ Lizard's leg and howlet's wing" etc. [4.1. 14–17]) by turning them into material versions of the words, or charmed particles of speech, that the first witch gathers, like debris from a battlefield, in the course of her village scavenging. But this time, the power of the particles lay in their novelty; they were palpably propitiate and, in the image of the singsong verse, they could be handled explicitly as toys. The objects thus oriented the witches around a new diversion, and reorganized their envious and appetitive energies within the structures of a self-conscious game.

We divided one more time into groups of three, and stitched together our own versions of the scene in 1.3. Our text began with the first witch saying to the others: "Look what I have!" then, divulging her object, "Here I have a pilot's thumb [a nest of hair, a shrunken head], etc." From there, I asked the actresses to improvise their own recreation, using the lines of the text to propel their given object around the circle.

Third Witch: "Her husband's to Aleppo gone, Master o'th' Tiger."

Second Witch: "Show me, show me" [at which point, the object was passed to the second witch, becoming an effigy of the sailor].

Second Witch: "I'll drain him dry as hay; / Sleep shall neither night nor day / Hang upon his penthouse lid" [as if inventing a curse with which to push the game along].

First Witch: "Give me" [reaching at the object].

Second Witch: "Assyut thee witch!"

And so on. The uneven rhythms of giving and seizing were neutralized when the three witches found their way back to one of the choral rhymes and fell jointly, or in orderly succession, into its cadences. "Weird sisters hand in hand/ Posters of the sea and land/ Thus do go about, about." But as pieces of spells revolved around the respective circles, their strength inevitably climaxed, then wound down. The violent redundancy of the curses culminated in their fragility, demonstrating their concomitant potential for failure. Without the stimulation of aggression and desire—the principles that held the circle in resilient tension—the spells themselves had nothing to feed on. At which point, a mischievous witch might break the increasingly embarrassing circularity by inciting curiosity or greed all over again, with the demand, "Look what I have!" The fetishes (or toys)¹⁶ when teasingly disclosed or generously proffered, usually assisted in recharging the witches, restoring their own sense of character and motivation within the collective circle.

Through the evolution of the game, pedagogy became in Stephen Greenblatt's sense a form of witchcraft, a "space where the fantastic and the bodily . . . touch" (1993, 127),¹¹ and where the material effects of Shakespeare's poetry doubled as external motive powers. Our point was to explore the torque of small phrases. At a corporeal level, we experienced their equivocal power to turn the members of our *weird* sisterhood both toward and against each other. We did not want to deny the aggression—the lust, envy, and desire—which flavored relations in the triad, any more than we could resist the momentum of the rotating lines that prevented those aggressive impulses from solidifying. The pivoting words spun attraction around, so that it grew, through the exchange of three speakers, into hostility. Parodies of gossip evolved into flirtation. The text worked as a complex (magical?) medium for decentering gender identities, if only because the words never served as reference points in a stable or hierarchical organization of meanings. Forms of exchanging secrets, and competing for desires—forms that were recognizably "feminine"—assumed strange contours when the objects of desire were spiny skeletons and disfigured corpses. The dismembered items, which emanated a macabre aura one moment, turned shoddy and tawdry the next. One of three men participating in the Rochester group cradled the embalmed cat in his lap and nursed it with an eye dropper. In sum: the feminine origins of the *weird sisters'* speech emerged as integral to its dynamic power, but the dynamism encoded in the text allowed us, as a group, to destabilize by way of a half-farical, half-sinister game the demonic stereotypes that have crystallized historically—in the moment of witchhunts, etc.—around those origins.¹²

Chapter 10 Notes

1. I am particularly indebted to Michael Taussig's account of the fetish in *The Nervous System* (Routledge, 1992).
2. All citations from the New Penguin Shakespeare will appear in parentheses.
3. In "Shakespeare Bewitched," Stephen Greenblatt describes the theatrical effects achieved when imaginative drive combines with what Aristotle calls *enargeia*: "the liveliness that comes when metaphors are set in action, when things are put vividly before the mind's eye, when language achieves visibility" (1993, 121). Tying his remarks to *Macbeth*, Greenblatt underscores the demonic dimension of language when it attains this level, not only of tangibility, but more important, of animation and praxis within the theatrical frame.
4. A good example of the genre is Ben Jonson's *Masque of Queens*, performed by the queen and her ladies at Whitehall on February 2, 1609. The anti-

masque featured 11 witches who entered the stage from "an ugly hell, which flaming beneath, smoked unto the top of the roof" (lines 21–22). As for the witches, Jonson writes, they came "first one, then two, and three, and more . . . some with rats on their head, some on their shoulders . . . all with spinules, timbrels, rattles, or other venereal instruments, making a confused noise, with strange gestures" (lines 26–30). In order to praise the monarch, Jonson contrasted the hags' impotent magic with James's powers of reason, installing the monarch in a Chaucerian House of Fame, whose structure was supported by statues of classical poet celebrities.

5. For more on court masques, see Stephen Orgel's *The Illusion of Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).
6. G. K. Hunter, in his introduction to the Penguin Edition, notes that performances at the Globe would have required a modification of this staging (30). For more on the *glas* and on the witches' riddling lies, see Stephen Mullany, "Lying like Truth: Riddle, Representation, and Treason in Renaissance England," *ELH* 47 (1980): 32–47.
7. With regard to the bearded witches, Berger says that they are "not androgynes but bemountered manlike images of the feminine power that threatens throughout the play to disarm the pathologically protective machine essential to the warrior society."
8. To capture the clunkiness of the costume, think of Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, when Mistress Ford and Mistress Page stuff him into "the witch of Branford's" clothing and smuggle him ignobly out of Ford's house.
9. Of the *witch sisters'* riddling, Berger writes "They flash their credentials as symbols of transrational disorder by uttering paradoxes and inversions that sound pregnant, but are easy to unpack," 67.
10. Macbeth: "There's nothing serious in mortality; / All is but toys."
11. Greenblatt concludes that "to conjure such a theatre places Shakespeare . . . in the position of the witch," 127.
12. Thanks to Kathy Couch and Caroline Prugh at Amherst; Kenneth Gross and the members of his graduate seminar at the University of Rochester.

Works Cited

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